

What used to be a notorious area is now being revamped into a flashy district that's distinctly Vegas. GARY SINGH takes us to the Fremont East District where fun has a 50's flavor



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enerally known as the entertainment capital of the world, Las Vegas attracts almost 40 million visitors each year, with the majority of tourists flocking either to the main strip or downtown's Fremont Street Experience, a four-block-long pedestrian mall with computer-generated sound and light shows on the overhead canopy. However, throughout the last 18 months, the city of Las Vegas has slowly but surely been trying to create a new entertainment stretch called the Fremont East District, complete with streetscape improvements, retro neon signage, valet parking and historic markers on the sidewalks. Intended as a revamped lane primarily for bars, live music and non-gaming hangouts, the area sits on Fremont Street just east of Las Vegas Boulevard and functions as a three-block extension of the Fremont Street Experience. What used to be a forgotten stretch where ne'er-do-wells wandered in from nearby drug-addled wastelands is now being reinvented as a burgeoning district geared for those who want to experience 1950's Las Vegas as an alternative to the sensory-overload feel of Fremont Street.

Fittingly, perhaps nothing could be more a propos of historic Vegas than the iconic El Cortez Hotel and Casino, which anchors the newly updated district. One of Vegas' legendary old school haunts, the El Cortez first opened in 1941. It is the oldest continuously running property in the city. Notorious gangster Bugsy Siegel once ran the joint, but the history everyone yaks about the most begins in 1963 when slots impresario Jackie Gaughan took over the place.

Under Gaughan's tenure—which ended last year when he sold off his interest at age 87—the El Cortez has functioned as a time-honored haven where locals can escape the garish touristy hysteria of the Strip. The venue has more than 1,100 slot machines plus some of the

friendliest Keno games in town. Despite recently finishing a US\$20 million renovation including a remodeled *porte cochere* (carriage porch) and valet entrance directly linked to Las Vegas Boulevard, the El Cortez absolutely retains its antiquated charm.

Out in the middle of the street, a huge new neon signage—with a blue martini glass; a spinning ruby slipper; and Lady Luck herself—takes one back to classic Las Vegas, almost what the street originally looked like 50 years ago. Although still in its infancy as a revamped district, Fremont Street East has potential, both for bringing the original Vegas feel back to the area and providing a more native vibe for the locals. The city is even offering incentives for live music bars, lounges, art galleries, and non-gaming venues to move on in, while the initial establishments have already begun the revitalization.

For example, Don't Tell Mama (517 Fremont St #A; tel. +1-702-598-1965) is a brand new piano bar that opened last March. Named after a tune from the famous Broadway show, *Cabaret*, the bar never has a cover. On seven nights a week you can waltz and find the customers, as well as the bartenders, waltzing themselves around while the pianist in the corner belts out show tunes. The employees all appear to be professionally-trained singers. Patrons can even jump on stage and join in, as if singing karaoke, but with a live piano player instead.

Right next door sits Beauty Bar (517 Fremont Street #150; tel. no. +1-702-598-1965; www.beautybar.com/lv/home.html), a retro-themed hipster bar overflowing with vintage décor and fashioned after a 1950's hair salon, complete with the hairdryers and all. A wide variety of younger counterculture folks imbibe at the place and the one common denominator is that everyone just wants to go where they can escape gambling culture. Live bands and DJs perform on the stage outside and the cover varies.

For a moodier, more gothic-looking dungeon-like place to drink, The Griffin (511 Fremont Street; tel. no. +1-702-382-0577; www.thegriffinlounge.com) awaits nearby. All you see from the sidewalk is the slick vertical



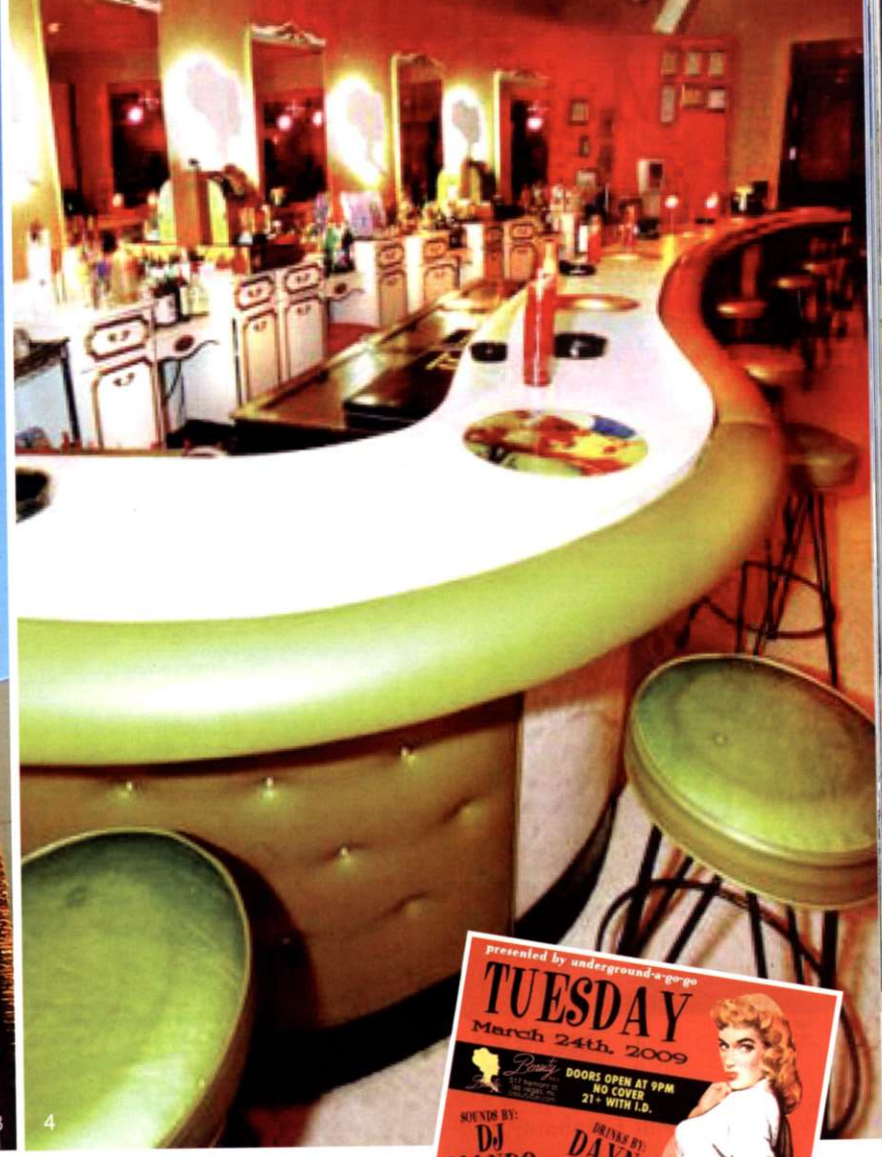
During the much-anticipated Pacquiao-Hatton boxing match last May 3 in Las Vegas, Filipino champ Manny Pacquiao stayed in a suite at the Mandalay Bay. Suites here reportedly cost around US\$600 a night. Over at the MGM Grand Garden Arena where the fight was held, all 14,000 seats were sold out.



neon sign and the darkened entrance, but upon crossing the velvet curtain to get inside, one is placed into a mix of the ghoulish, the fashionable, and the creative. Artists, entertainers, counterculture luminaries, hipsters and local employees from the service industries hang at Griffin. Large concrete arches stretch across the roof and there's even a fireplace in the middle of the floor. Morose oil paintings and custom ornamentation highlight the walls and as with much of the Fremont East District, the place caters primarily to anyone who wants to avoid the tourists.

Around the corner one finds the all-brick façade of the Downtown Cocktail Room (111 Las Vegas Blvd.; tel. no. +1-702-880-3696; www.downtownlv.net) a more upscale and chic lounge where folks and mingle and listen to resident DJ's, including a few from New York. Further down Fremont, Mamacita's Restaurant (611 E. Fremont Street; tel. no. +1-702-474-7033) is a colorful Mexican and Cuban eatery that serves gargantuan portions while consistently blasting Salsa videos from the 54" plasma screen. If you stay at the El Cortez, you must eat across the street at Mamacita's at one point or another.

Perhaps the best aspect of the newly burgeoning Fremont East District, is the genuine bona fide feel that something somehow is about to start growing in this neighborhood again—something to add a more creative and authentic element to this stretch of road. Of course, some of the seediness from farther down the street still lingers, but when you're inside each one of these establishments you feel like the gaudy commercial Las Vegas has simply left the building.



1. At night, the iconic martini glass marks the arch in the Fremont East District. 2. The cabaret-themed Don't Tell Mama is one of the establishments that opened in the area. 3. Unmistakable landmarks in Fremont also include the spinning ruby slipper and Lady Luck. 4. Don't mistake Beauty Bar for your average salon. In fact, it's not a salon at all. It's a salon-themed bar!

SOBER SEASON

Las Vegas is known for being immune to national recessions, but not anymore. This time, the economic downturn has hit the city hard and Vegas is perhaps looking at its biggest lull since the Great Depression. Housing permits are way down, as are construction jobs. The state of Nevada's budget cuts are nearing US\$1 billion and the downtown will continue at least through the rest of the year. Overall tourism has visibly declined and those who do visit aren't spending as much. In general, tourists are migrating to cheaper hotels and deciding to only have one glass of wine with dinner instead of three. Even taxi drivers aren't getting tipped as much. However, the legendary Steve Wynn refuses to even blink an eye, except to maybe slash room rates. The new Wynn Encore, a gargantuan US\$2 billion, 2,034-room project that opened last January, has yet to really attract the high rollers, so even though prices are slashed, the service is not. All the city can do is just wait for the tides to turn.

Go

Getting to the Fremont East District is easy, as it sits right on the other side of Las Vegas Blvd. from the Fremont Street Experience. If you're driving, make your way to the 15 Freeway and then follow the signs for downtown Las Vegas. The gateway arch will welcome you to the area and if you arrive at nighttime, the neon signage just shouts out loud from the center median.

Stay

The El Cortez Cabana Suites (www.elcortezcabanasuites.com) is a chic new complement to the El Cortez. Its 64 rooms feature ultra-modern designs and custom furnishings. If the El Cortez itself is old school Vegas, then the suites are new-school Miami.

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